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# NATIONAL SECURITY—THE ISSUE IN THE PLEBISCITE

AN APPEAL TO THE CANADIAN ELECTORATE  
FOR AN AFFIRMATIVE VOTE ON APRIL 27th

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*An Address broadcast by*

The Right Honourable W. L. MACKENZIE KING, M.P.  
*Prime Minister of Canada*

OVER THE CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION NETWORK

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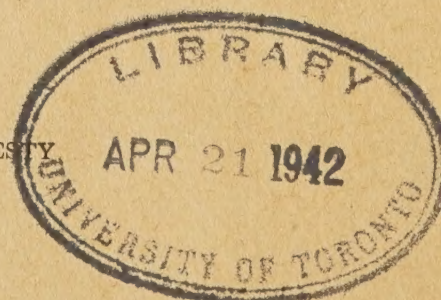
APRIL 7th, 1942

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*Issued by the Director of Public Information under authority of  
Hon. J. T. Thorson, Minister of National War Services*



OTTAWA  
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1942









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# NATIONAL SECURITY—THE ISSUE IN THE PLEBISCITE

*An Appeal to the Canadian Electorate for an Affirmative Vote  
on April 27th, 1942*

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AN ADDRESS BROADCAST BY

The Right Honourable W. L. MACKENZIE KING, M.P.  
*Prime Minister of Canada*

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I wish to speak to you to-night, my fellow Canadians, on a matter which, at this time of war, is of first importance—of first importance to the present position of our country, and to its future security; and, therefore, of real concern to the homes and lives of all.

## *Government Seeks a Free Hand*

On Monday, the 27th of this month, you will be asked to give the government a free hand in the discharge of its duty in carrying on the war. This may seem to you a strange request. What may seem stranger still is that this request is being made at a time of war. All of us, I believe, realize that, in war time, a government has greater need for a free hand than in peace time. Why then, you ask, does the government at this time of war, come to us for a free hand?

The answer is not, as you might suppose, that the government lacks full legal power for the conduct of the war. The hands of the government are not tied either by the law or the constitution. The government has been given by parliament much wider powers for wartime than it commands in peacetime. It is important that you should understand, that at the present time, as far as legal power goes, the government is perfectly free to take any action which a majority in parliament will support. This will continue to be true of the power of the Government at Ottawa to the end of the war.



How then, you ask, are the hands of the government tied? What is it that binds the government? What is the restriction which the government seeks to have removed? Why was the restriction ever imposed? Why should the government and parliament not tackle this question on their own responsibility without resorting to a plebiscite, and why, after two and a half years of war, has it become necessary to have the restriction removed?

These are questions which have been repeatedly raised ever since the government announced its intention to ask you to free its hands. They are very natural questions. They are questions to which you will expect a satisfactory answer.

### *Legal Powers and Moral Obligations*

If the only thing that mattered in the relations between the people and the government was the possession of power, the government would, of course, be free to do as it pleases. That is what obtains under a dictatorship. No account is taken of the will of the people. It is on that principle that the Nazi, Italian and Japanese dictators are acting to-day. Under democratic government, however, quite as important as the possession of power is its exercise in accordance with the will of the people.

When those who hold representative and responsible positions have given a definite promise to the people, they have created an obligation to act in accordance with that promise, until the people are again consulted. Such an obligation may not be binding according to law, but as an obligation it is no less sacred.

There are those, I know, who make light of what they call "political promises." It will, I think, be generally agreed that a political platform or programme is one thing; a definite and concrete promise or pledge is quite another. Because of circumstances, a government may, without breaking faith, fail to carry out, to the letter, its full programme. No change in circumstances could, however, justify a government in ignoring a specific pledge to the people, unless it was clear that the safety of the nation was immediately involved, and there was no possibility of consulting the people.

### *Nature of Restriction upon Government*

The pledge from which the present government is asking to be freed is not related to any ordinary day-to-day matter of policy. It is a pledge which was made specifically in relation to the conduct of the present war. It is a pledge which was given, by government and opposition alike, before and since the outbreak of the war, and to which, at the time it was made, no political party took exception. The present House of Commons was returned in the light of that pledge.



The pledge to which I refer is, as you are all aware, that, as a method of raising men for military service overseas, resort would not be had to conscription. In other words, that voluntary enlistment would be the method by which men would be raised for service overseas.

That promise is a restriction upon the government to-day. It is, as I have said, not a legal restriction. It is a moral obligation and I need not add a moral obligation of the most solemn kind. It is equally the one and only restriction upon the exercise by the government of its full power.

### *How Restriction came to be Imposed*

You ask: why was the restriction ever imposed? Why was the promise given? "Surely," many will say, "the government should have known that it would need a free hand in time of war. Why, then, did the government tie its own hands?" The answer to this question is very simple.

The pledge not to impose conscription, as everyone knows, was the result of Canada's experience in the last war. The way in which conscription was then introduced, and the way it was enforced, gave rise to bitter resentment. Moreover, events proved that conscription in the last war had little or no military value.

Before, and at the commencement of the war, the people of Canada, like the peoples of most other countries, continued to think of the present war in terms of the last war. They thought of the situation *overseas* as they remembered it from 1914 to 1918. They thought of the situation *in Canada* in terms of the disunity which followed the introduction of conscription. They thought of just another European war. They most certainly did not think of a war in which all the nations of the world would be in danger. Much less did Canadians think of the war as one in which Canada might become the most coveted of all the prizes of war. That, however, is the actual situation to-day.

The pledge not to impose conscription for service overseas was given in order to maintain the unity of Canada. Without this assurance, I do not believe that parliament would have given, as it did, prompt and wholehearted approval to Canada's entry into the war. It was the trust of the people in the pledged word of the government which then maintained our national unity.

### *Importance of National Unity*

We must never lose sight of the importance of national unity. National unity is, I believe, more essential to the success of the war effort of any country than most other factors combined. "Every



kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falleth”.

The restriction upon the power of the government was necessary at the outset to preserve national unity. It has helped until recently to maintain national unity. In the past few months it has, however, become a matter of controversy and a threat to unity. You know full well that a foremost aim of my public life has been the preservation of the unity of Canada. I must say that under the changed conditions of to-day, and with Canada's record in the war what it has been over the past two and a half years, I see no reason why the removal of the restriction should weaken our unity. Instead, I believe firmly that its removal will help to overcome a source of irritation and disunity within our own country. It will, I believe, also help to remove a source of misunderstanding in the other countries united with Canada in the common effort to preserve freedom in the world.

### *Why Plebiscite Necessary*

I come now to the question: why have the government and parliament not tackled this question on their own responsibility without resorting to a plebiscite?

The answer is very simple. Had the government taken the position that, as conditions had changed, it did not intend longer to be bound by any pledge, it would immediately have been said that the government had violated the most sacred undertaking ever given in its name.

It would most certainly have been said that, before so deciding, we should have referred the matter to the people in a general election, or a referendum, or as we are doing, by means of a plebiscite, and asked to be relieved from all past commitments. It would have been asserted that we were no better than the Nazis; that we had ceased to have regard for the will of the people and were now relying upon force to give effect to policies which were the direct opposite of those on which we had been returned to power. Had the present government attempted to do such a thing, does anyone imagine it would have been able to retain the confidence of parliament? For the government to have disregarded its pledged word would, I believe, have helped to destroy faith, not merely in the government, but in democratic institutions. Far from increasing our total war effort, the disunity caused by such a breach of faith would, I believe, have made our effort less effective. By such an arbitrary act, we might well have destroyed the national unity on which our war effort is founded.



## *Maintenance of Faith in Democratic Institutions*

There never was a time when the need is what it is to-day to conserve what still exists of faith in democratic institutions. The present unhappy state of the world is, in large part, the result of broken pledges. Nazi Germany has erected bad faith and the broken pledge into a principle of action. Bad faith, broken pledges, and disregard of the popular will, are the forces against which Canada is fighting to-day.

But, you may say, no one would expect the government to have taken any such arbitrary action. What the government should have done was to have gone to parliament and asked the members to give it a free hand. It is said that a release would have been granted immediately. But would it? I am certain, in fact, it would not. And that for the simple reason that members of parliament would, for the most part, have taken the position that they were as much bound by past commitments as were the members of the government.

## *Canada's War Effort Being Placed in False Light*

And that brings me to the last of the questions to which you are awaiting a reply: "Why, after two and a half years of war, has it become necessary to have the restriction removed?"

One answer is that this restriction is being represented as the bar to an all-out effort on Canada's part. It makes no difference whether conscription for service overseas would add to Canada's total effort or not, the fact that the government is not free to consider its adoption is made to appear as limiting Canada's war effort.

The truth, of course, is that our army to-day is just as large as it would have been if conscription for overseas service had been adopted. The absence of conscription for overseas service has not limited our war effort. The lack of power to impose such conscription has, however, placed our war effort in a wholly false light before our own citizens, and, what is worse, before our allies. In other words, conscription has been made the symbol of a total effort, regardless of all Canada is doing to help win the war.

## *Issue not Conscription—but Powers of Government*

The issue at present is not conscription; it is whether or not the government, subject to its responsibility to parliament, is to be free to decide that question itself in the light of all national considerations. The government is not asking you to say whether or not conscription should be adopted. That responsibility the government is asking you to leave to itself and to parliament, with entire freedom to decide the question on its merits.



The question of conscription, properly viewed, is a *military question*. The place to discuss it is in parliament. What the government now seeks for itself and for parliament is freedom to consider and debate and decide this question, like all other questions connected with the war, unrestricted by any pledge and in the light only of the needs of national security.

A part of our forces should be kept in Canada to protect us against attack; a part of our forces should be sent overseas to help defeat the enemy and thus prevent him from attacking Canada. Both tasks are equally essential to our safety. Anyone who tells you that only one of these tasks is necessary is deceiving you. The government with the information which it alone possesses is in a position to decide where Canada's forces can be used to the greatest advantage in defending Canada, and in helping to defeat Germany and Japan, or how the armed forces required can best be raised. We do not ask the people to make that decision. But we believe the matter is so important that the government and parliament should be completely free to decide the question wholly on its merits.

### *Parliament to Safeguard Rights of People*

The people of Canada are not going to hesitate to take any step which they believe to be necessary for the preservation of their freedom. They are certainly not going to hesitate to adopt any measure needed to preserve their national existence, but they will wish to know, and they have a right to know, that before any step is taken, that step is necessary. This is particularly true in the case of a measure which has been the subject of bitter controversy and the source of disunity in the past.

The only place it can satisfactorily be decided whether a particular step is necessary or a particular measure needed, is in parliament. In parliament, the government can state its case and provide the information on which a wise decision can alone be made.

In the greatest of all emergencies, I ask you, are you not prepared to trust the government and your own parliament to see that only those things are done which are wholly in the interest of the country? If there are any who are not, who or what are they prepared to trust? This is the question I should like every citizen of Canada to ask himself, and herself as he or she proceeds to answer "yes" or "no" to the question being asked on the 27th of this month.

### *National Existence as well as National Freedom Threatened*

But there is a greater and more urgent reason why the restriction on the power of the government should be removed. And to this I ask your special attention. I have spoken of unity. To a nation, there is one thing even more important than the preservation of its unity.



That is the preservation of its existence. To those who, beyond the events of to-day, are able to look into the future, it is no longer the unity, it is the very existence of our country as a free nation which they see is in danger to-day. We are no longer in a world where even the most powerful nation is able, by itself, to save itself from the ambition and greed of the aggressor nations. For the preservation of its very existence, each free country is going to need all the help that other free countries can give. It will require the utmost co-operation on the part of all free countries to save them from becoming victims, one by one, of the gangster nations whose undoubted aim is world conquest. With our immense territory, great resources and small population, no country may come to need the help of the other countries more than our own. Unless we continue to do all we can to help others, we shall have no right to expect them to do all they can to help us. Until the present tide of conquest is turned into overwhelming defeat for the enemy, no country—and assuredly not Canada—can consider itself secure.

### *International Situation Exceedingly Critical*

The last thing I have been or would wish to be is an alarmist. I would, however, not be true to the trust the people of Canada have reposed in me did I not say that I believe the situation, for all free nations, is far more critical to-day than it has ever been. Canada's position is by no means an exception. Look at what has happened in the past two and a half years of war; look at what is happening to-day, and ask yourselves what other view is possible. Practically the whole of continental Europe, except Russia, is under the domination of Germany, and is compelled to serve her war machine. Despite Russia's magnificent campaign and the ground she has regained, much of her European territory is still in Nazi hands. Who can say what the outcome of the struggle between Russia and Germany may be? In the Middle East and in Africa, the situation is also desperately critical. In Asia and in the Pacific, Japan controls a large part of China, and has seized most of the strategic strongholds and territories formerly possessed by The Netherlands, France, Britain and the United States.

Across the Pacific, the tide of Japanese conquest has swept swiftly over thousands of miles of sea. A few weeks ago, it was Hong Kong, Singapore and the East Indies—attacked and taken; a little later, Burma and Australia attacked, with New Zealand also threatened. To-day it is Ceylon and India. Who can say how, or when, or where, the sweep of attempted invasion and actual conquest is going to end. Neither sea nor land defences have stopped the advances of the Germans and the Japanese. It becomes increasingly clear that both Germany and Japan are putting forth a supreme effort to achieve



world mastery in 1942. At the moment, they are aiming at uniting their forces in a manner which will give them control of the strategic lines of communication in the whole eastern hemisphere.

### *Mounting Dangers to Canada from East and West*

In the British Commonwealth of Nations, Canada and South Africa are the only countries not immediately subject to attack. Does anyone imagine that if the aggressor nations are successful in the present areas of conflict, they will leave the western hemisphere alone? Is anyone so blind as to believe that already they have not cast their covetous eyes upon the vast territory and resources of our own Dominion? Off our own Atlantic coasts and those of the United States, enemy U-boats have been destroying shipping at an alarming rate. There are strong reasons for believing that Germany hopes, in the course of the next few months, to be able by means of a great naval offensive on the Atlantic, to cut the sea lanes between North America and Britain, and to cripple the merchant fleets of Britain and the United States. Japan has a similar aim on the Pacific. These offensives may come at any time. One thing is perfectly certain. If the enemy is not kept at bay on the oceans, and defeated beyond the waters of the Atlantic and the Pacific, the final battles of the world conflict will be fought in the waters and upon the soil of Canada and the United States.

Here surely is the most powerful of reasons why every effort should be made, as it is being made, alike by the United States and Canada, to help the other united nations to engage the enemy and try to defeat him where he is to be found to-day. We cannot defend our country and save our homes and families by waiting at home for the enemy to attack us. Every country that has stood behind its own defences in this war has sooner or later been attacked. To remain on the defensive is the surest way to bring the war to Canada. Of course, we should look to our defences; we should protect our coasts; we should strengthen our ports and our cities against attack. But we must also take our full part in the combat; we must go out to meet the enemy before he reaches our shores; we must, if we can, defeat him before he attacks us, before our cities are laid waste and before the women and children of Canada are injured or killed in our streets and our homes.

### *Canada Fighting to Preserve Freedom and her own Existence*

It is unfortunate that so many have come to think of Canada's war effort as aid for other countries. In reality, it is much more than that. Every sailor, every soldier, every airman in Canada's forces, wherever they serve; every ship, every gun, every plane we



manufacture, regardless of the forces that use them; the food we supply to our allies; all these may be aid to other countries against a common enemy, but are equally a contribution to the defence of Canada. Let no one tell you that Canada is in this war to uphold any selfish cause of empire. It is not true. We are fighting to preserve our freedom and our national existence, to defend our homes and families, from an enemy drawing ever nearer. We would do well to remember that, against the piratical ambitions of Germany and Japan alike, the one sure shield of defence is actual combat in the front line of battle, whether on land, at sea or in the air.

### *Mutual Defence and Mutual Aid*

Here is the strongest of reasons why no excuse should remain for anyone to say that because of a restriction upon the exercise by the government of its full powers, Canada's war effort is not all it might be. Should the day come—and it may come soon—when Canada is faced with attack, and we need help from the United States or Britain or any of the United Nations, how would we feel if we thought their governments were restricted in their power to aid Canada? We would do well, I think, not to permit any misunderstanding to arise in other countries as to our readiness to do our full part in the struggle we are all fighting together.

Aggression has followed aggression with such speed in so many parts of the world that no one can now predict what new areas the war may reach next year, next month or next week. Danger threatens us from the east and from the west. It is in the face of this peril that for the defence of our freedom and of our country, the government asks you to give it a free hand.



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*W. L. Mackenzie King.*